

"Political corrida", or peculiarities of national hunting for cats in a sack

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After closing down the "Pislyamova" analytical weekly and reducing the scope of its TSN news program to a mere digest of facts and events in what was presented as a compromise with the executive branch and an effort to withstand the pressure and maintain the operation after the election period, the Studio 1+1 TV channel launched a new project, 5 to 5, designed to encourage voters' participation in the election process. Described by its creators as a top-class show, both in terms of cost and presentation, the 5 to 5 was planned as "distanced and unbiased coverage of the course of the election campaign".

The idea was simple: a quality political talk show, giving, on the one hand, top five candidates of two political parties the chance to take part in an open debate and convince the viewers - who are, in fact, the voters - of the party's right to claim a place in Ukraine's political life. On the other hand, the show made viewers active participants of the election process. All in all, 16 parties were chosen at random to form eight pairs of "sparring partners". According to the program organizers, the necessity to choose only 16 out of 30 parties and blocs allowed to run arose from the shortage of air time available for the 5 to 5, i.e., the sum of air time allocated for Vyacheslav Pikhovshek's Fifth Corner and Mykola Veresen's Taboo plus seven minutes given by the Studio 1+1. The programs were to be shown twice a week within the last month before the parliamentary elections scheduled for March 29, 1998.

Before the first program was broadcast, some of the twelve parties that had not been invited to participate felt unfairly ignored or even deliberately left out. The Forward, Ukraine! bloc, chaired by Vice Speaker Victor Musiyaka, even complained to the Central Election Commission (note the Vice Speaker's view on the status of the media freedom in this state!), others also hurried to accuse the independent broadcaster of performing the authorities' order. Though, after the programs featuring the National Front vs the Social-Liberal Association SLOn, and the Party of Reforms and Order vs the Progressive Socialists, the parties realized that the 5 to 5 is not a free opportunity to present their agendas to millions of viewers, but a challenge they were not prepared to respond to.

A week later, nine parties and blocs refused to participate in the program. Forces as different as Communists and the Rukh were remarkably similar in their desire to explain their back-off by drawbacks of the show and to deny the common feature of actors of the Ukrainian political environment: the inability to maintain their positions and advocate their views skillfully. No matter how much parties and blocs from different sides of the political spectrum object to "artistic-aesthetic and ethical form of the program", or the hosts' manner to steer the show, or argue they have been invited "to seal the hole" in the program after others refused to participate, it appears that the common reason for the withdrawal is the lack of confidence and the fear to lose potential voters that might get to know the party too well.

In fact, every party or individual participant is free to take part - or not to take part - in any program. The problem in this case is not the individual leaders' attitude to the idea and implementation of the show, nor the disruption of the authors' and producers' plans. What does call for attention is the parties' unwillingness to be exposed to public scrutiny and fear of open debates, enhanced by the lack of knowledge of how to listen to opponents and present counter-arguments in a civilized and convincing manner. The grounds for refusal to participate in the show, previously accepted enthusiastically as a way to get some extra publicity, were remarkably uniform. Chairman of television projects of the

Working Ukraine blocs sent a letter to Studio 1+1 explaining that "the staging and the nature of this TV program [i.e., the 5 to 5] do not correspond with principles and ideas of our bloc" and arguing that "we [i.e., the Working Ukraine] did not suspect what form it will be given by the mediators" and that "this kind of a "show" of the Western type does not respond to expectations of people who want to know about positions and views of parties and blocs that participate in the election." An earlier letter, signed by the same individual, contained an agreement to take part in the show "with pleasure" and said nothing about "suspicions" and "expectations". Other parties that chose to duck the show included the Party of Regional Renaissance of Ukraine and the European Choice of Ukraine, which failed to gather the top five candidates on their lists at the short notice, as well as the All-Ukrainian Party of the Working People, which demanded the program to be broadcast live, and the Party of National-Economic Renaissance of Ukraine. The Green party representative was sincere and did not look for lame excuses. Stressing that the party wanted to promote its message, and not to advertise faces of party leaders, the representative admitted that the party's growing rating might be damaged if it performed clumsily in the show. The Green party's refusal was followed by that of the Ukrainian People's Movement Rukh, expected to be the Greens' vis-a-vis. When offered to join the debate with the far right Ukrainian National Assembly instead, Rukh leader Vyacheslav Chornovil rejected the invitation and added the UNA was not serious enough for them to debate with. The refusal of Rukh, a party once justfully proud of its contribution to the development of democracy and open society in this state, from challenge of the rival on the grounds that the UNA was just "not our [i.e., Rukh's] level", was followed with an interview given by Vyacheslav Chornovil to one of the hosts, Mykola Veresen, and broadcast immediately after the 5 to 5, where the UNA remained a lonely star of the show. From the interview, viewers and potential voters felt that by committing its participation in the show the Rukh had done a special favor to Studio 1+1 while making only two demands as conditions. Specifically, Vyacheslav Chornovil demanded that his party would communicate only with Mykola Veresen and that Vyacheslav Pikhovshek would not even come close to them. The second demand was to provide all the participants with personal microphones so that the hosts could not interrupt their speeches. Should that be done, the show would have deteriorated into an endless monologue of the Rukh leader... From the interview, one might get the impression that the 5 to 5 is, in a way, harmful to the democratization process in Ukraine, for, according to Mr. Chornovil, after right-wing and right-centrist parties take part in the show, some of Rukh's voters would switch to them. In this context, he was particularly critical of the National Front, Rukh's traditional competitor for votes in ethnicity- and statehood-conscious Western Ukraine. Finally, the Rukh leader suggested that Mykola Veresen formally rejected his part in the show and signed a statement thereto.

The situation attracted eager attention of the media. Newspapers and television programs commented on the unprecedented "timidity" of some parties and speculated on how the Studio 1+1 would cope with the problem. Articles in major newspapers ranged in tone from chastising politicians for seeking to make use of anything, even their own cowardice, to condemning the Studio 1+1 for being too loyal to the executive branch and helping it to manipulate voters' minds, to claiming to protect the Ukrainian information environment from "scandalous" foreign-funded programming, questioning "moral and artistic values" or wondering about sources of funding for the show. The 5 to 5 even received its antipode, the Scales, a new program hatched for about a week and hosted by director of the International Media Center Mykola Knyazhytsky. The Scales is based on providing the floor to political forces that rejected participation in the 5 to 5. With no acute questions and tricky comments, of course. In a way, that proved that the creators of the 5 to 5 did achieve at least part of their objective: they made people think, debate, question and challenge politicians - and encouraged other media folks to follow their example.

Commenting on the unexpected twist in the project, Mykola Veresen noted: "As I say in the program, I've always wanted people in this country to make a conscious choice. I've wanted them to vote "for", and not to vote "against". The result of the two initial shows was that people finally began to think who they should vote for, instead of thinking who they should vote against. The parties that refused to take part in the 5 to 5 had realized that - that's why they withdrew. For they do not have to make an effort to make people vote "against". Instead, one should push hard to ensure they vote "for" - exactly what the 5 to 5 proved." "I want my country to stop choosing cats in a sack," went on Vyacheslav Pikhovshek. "Eight political parties and blocs remained the "cats" that did not want to come out of the sack. Well, I can only wish they remain in their sacks. I wouldn't want my compatriots to take this fact easy."